



# **NAVAL POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL**

**MONTEREY, CALIFORNIA**

## **THESIS**

**PARTNERSHIPS: THE PATH TO IMPROVING CRISIS  
COMMUNICATION**

by

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March 2007

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**PARTNERSHIPS: THE PATH TO IMPROVING CRISIS COMMUNICATION**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The global availability of 24-hour broadcast news establishes the media as a critical link to communicating with the public in times of crisis. As a result, the broadcast news media play a significant role in shaping how the public reacts in a crisis. Since fire and police departments will likely be the media's primary source for information in the initial stages of a disaster, preventing the loss of lives depends on how quickly information is delivered to the public. However, positive working relationships between public safety and the media are often hampered by differences in police and fire cultures, distrust and the lack of a clear understanding of each other's roles and responsibilities. The safety messages delivered by public safety officials and the media in an emergency have the power to influence the way the public behaves and the protective actions they take. This report examines how forming nontraditional partnerships between public safety agencies and the media can be used effectively to give direction to the public before, during and after a crisis. This report proposes a set of recommendations to help public safety agencies avoid costly communication mistakes through best practices and lessons learned from recent high profile incidents.

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## I. INFORMATION CAN SAVE LIVES

This is a problem that goes from zero to 60 in a real big hurry, and if you're not ready before the accelerator starts, you're not going to be ready when it gets to 60.

--Paul Bremer,  
Former Ambassador-at-Large for Counter-Terrorism

Living with the threat of terrorism, natural disaster or a public health crisis challenges America's cities to strengthen relationships with nontraditional partners in order to improve emergency preparedness. The future success of homeland security depends in part on the collective ability of local law enforcement, fire, public health and emergency management agencies to work with the news media in keeping the public informed. In a disaster, the public relies on public safety officials and the news media for direction to keep them safe. Research polls say the public's first choice for news about terrorist attacks is cable television networks, such as CNN, MSNBC, and FOX News.<sup>1</sup> Public safety (police and fire) agencies must make the most of the media's power to influence the way the public behaves and the protective actions they take whether it is sheltering in place or evacuating an area. The need for first responders and the broadcast news media to work cooperatively in a crisis cannot be overstated. The loss of more than 1,500 people in Hurricane Katrina is a sobering reminder of the consequences of a failure on the part of public officials and broadcast media to deliver consistent safety messages.<sup>2</sup>

However, effective working relationships between public safety and the media are often hampered by cultural differences, distrust and the lack of a clear understanding of each other's roles and responsibilities. Conflict created by public safety's history of withholding information from the media to protect an investigation and the media's reputation for inaccurate reporting can shut down a critical information pathway between citizens and public safety agencies. Whether combating threats to homeland security or

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<sup>1</sup> The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, *Public Views of Terrorism Coverage*, (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2005; available on the web: <http://people-press.org/reports/display.php3?PageID=12>, [Accessed: September 20, 2005].

<sup>2</sup> Tom Brown et al, *A Failure of Initiative: Final Report of the Select Bipartisan Committee to Investigate the Preparations for and Response to Hurricane Katrina* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2006), 10.

battling a natural disaster, protecting the public calls for making a fundamental change in this often times adversarial relationship. In keeping with the National Homeland Security Strategy's statement that "all disasters are ultimately local" it is appropriate to examine whether establishing voluntary partnerships between local public safety and the media that includes emergency planning, education and training can be used to better manage the release of information when disaster strikes.

This study identifies and discusses the factors necessary for collaboration between public safety and the media in order to save lives and reduce the risk of injury. While the focal point of this research is the City of Seattle, Washington, the author seeks to draw lessons that apply to cities around the country. The ultimate goal is to provide a crisis communication template for local public safety agencies and the broadcast news media.

## **A. PROBLEM STATEMENT**

Elected officials and public safety leaders face significant challenges to achieving a viable state of preparedness based on the wide range of potential natural and man-made disasters. Counter terrorism officials list Seattle in the top ten cities to be targeted by terrorists. Seattle was one of only seven cities designated for federal grant funding under the first Urban Area Security Initiative (UASI). The risk of a terrorist attack in the City of Seattle is rated approximately equal to the risk of landslides, snowstorms, and volcanic eruptions.<sup>3</sup> To make matters worse, the Puget Sound region is located on a major earthquake fault line. In addition, a public health crisis such as a flu pandemic would severely tax resources in every community. With this high potential for harm, public safety leaders in Seattle must develop the communication skills and resources to deliver accurate and consistent messages to citizens prior to, during and after a crisis.

Currently, Seattle has no crisis communication plan that specifically addresses how public safety leaders can best work with the media in reporting on homeland security threats. By keeping the status quo, the city runs the risk of being blindsided by events leaders have not prepared to manage as experienced during the World Trade Organization

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<sup>3</sup> Seattle Police Department, *All Hazards Mitigation Plan* (2004): Section 2, 10.

(WTO) Riots in Seattle in 1999. The lack of effective crisis communication during the riots left city leaders and public safety agencies scrambling to protect frightened citizens and hundreds of international dignitaries who gathered for the conference. The city suffered economic losses from business closures and the citizens lost faith in their local government. Addressing this vital need for a proactive communication strategy could result in preventable death, injury and property damage.

A primary reason for creating a crisis communication plan is that managing communications during a disaster requires different skills than handling daily emergencies. The way leaders normally communicate with the public during routine emergencies may not be effective in a sudden catastrophic event. As Barbara Reynolds has observed, “Your every word, every eye twitch and every passing emotion resonates with heightened importance to a public desperate for information to help them be safe and recover from crisis.”<sup>4</sup> To compound the need for trained communicators, broadcast news media has increased its demand for information by capitalizing on technology (email updates, webcams and pod casts) to deliver the news 24-hours a day, seven days a week. Public safety leaders who are expected to provide immediate information in a crisis have not similarly evolved to keep pace. Minutes after an incident occurs, media inquiries will overwhelm the local police chief and fire chief at an emergency scene or via pager or cellular telephone. What they say to the media and the language they use sets the tone for whether the public remains calm or reacts in fear.

This thesis examines a core problem: the current lack of a comprehensive crisis communication plan that addresses homeland security. Public safety leaders are expected to speak knowledgeably about complex incidents ranging from a biological attack to a chemical attack to the detonation of an explosive device. The absence of well rehearsed communication results in the delivery of confusing, inaccurate information at a time when the public most needs clear direction. Since first responders and broadcast media are the primary sources for information in the initial stages of a crisis, public safety agencies must collaborate with broadcast media to ensure the appropriate safety

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<sup>4</sup> Barbara Reynolds, *Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication: By Leaders for Leaders* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2003), 4.

information reaches the community. Citizens locally, regionally and nationally turn to trusted public safety leaders first for guidance, reassurance and direction. Public safety leaders must interact with the media in order to perform their primary mission, ensuring the safety of the community they serve.

## **B. RESEARCH PROBLEM**

This research addresses the question of whether partnerships among fire and police agencies and broadcast news media can further homeland security preparedness. Using the current relationship between public safety agencies and the media in Seattle as a model, this research examines the necessary elements to create a successful partnership. The ultimate goal of these research questions provides public safety agencies with the tools to better manage crisis communication that result in:

- The delivery of timely emergency information enabling the public to take protective actions such as “sheltering in place”
- The acquisition of skills for public safety leaders to communicate with the public through the media during times of crisis
- Creating collaboration and training between public safety agencies and media organizations that meet the needs of both organizations to better serve the public

A series of survey questions and personal interviews also describe the quality of the current relationship between local public safety agencies and the news media in Seattle and any obstacles preventing collaboration. The results of the analysis establish criteria for creating a more effective working relationship.

## **C. SIGNIFICANCE: IMPACT AND IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY**

This thesis examines how the lack of a crisis communication plan negatively impacts Seattle public safety agencies and ultimately the public. It explores how a cooperative effort between public safety leaders and broadcast media can deliver safety information and direction to the public before, during and after a crisis. It describes the liability of maintaining the status quo by examining valuable crisis communication lessons learned from terrorist incidents and a natural disaster. Using the best practices from these incidents as examples, this thesis proposes a plan to improve communication and collaboration with the media in order to avoid costly mistakes in the future.

This thesis concludes with recommendations for a plan for the City of Seattle that public safety agencies around the country can also apply. Developing and implementing a plan to address communication problems lends credence to the Seattle Mayor's stated goal of making Seattle "the most prepared city" in the country. Strategic, proactive, crisis communications policy, training and practices ultimately saves lives, protects property and eases suffering. The city should capitalize on the harsh lessons learned from past disasters such as Hurricane Katrina and the 9/11 attacks that exemplify how public safety agencies have paid the price for a lack of preparedness. The City of Seattle benefits by engaging the National Strategy for Homeland Security and the Office of Domestic Preparedness Prevention and Deterrence Guidelines and assists in meeting current UASI requirements for a regional approach to preparedness.

## **D. RESEARCH OBJECTIVE**

This research strives to identify the lessons learned from past communication failures and successes and to apply them to Seattle. Answers to survey questions posed to police, fire and media representatives describe the current relationship between public safety and the media and the similarities and differences in their expectations for information sharing. The survey results highlight factors that impede each agency's ability to communicate effectively with the other. This thesis develops recommendations

for the City of Seattle to implement a proactive crisis communication plan that public safety leaders around the country can implement. This plan includes a proposal to establish a working partnership between public safety and the broadcast news media through joint disaster planning and cross training. In interviews with several Seattle news media executives, they indicate their willingness to better prepare for disaster by listening to public safety leaders regarding critical information to protect the community.

This argument's logic is based on the simple concept of the value of insurance. Ultimately, it is advantageous to develop and practice crisis communication skills *before* the next significant incident occurs. Most people would agree that buying and installing smoke detectors is easier and more cost effective than rebuilding a house after it burns down. The plan for establishing local media partnerships provides insurance. Both city leaders and local news organizations benefit from including the media in city wide disaster planning and drills. Relationships formed prior to a crisis give the media a better understanding of how their city leaders manage a disaster.

A crisis communication plan is a practical investment. Because local government values cost effectiveness, planning and preparation is less costly than repairing the damage that comes from bad publicity. The way the news media report disasters (whether its effects are calming or panic inducing) influences how quickly people return to work and see life returning to normal. Economic recovery, business continuity planning, aid to critical infrastructure and the overall return to normalcy are often overlooked requirements of national guidance documents. Since disasters cause chaos and disrupt the economy, the faster communities can recover, the easier they can restore economic stability. Engaging these efforts is valuable and politically expedient for Seattle public safety leaders. A crisis communication plan that includes training and partnering with the media is in the city's best interest. Arming leaders with the skills and knowledge to better manage information and help citizens protect themselves in a crisis renders the city less vulnerable.

## **E. METHODOLOGY**

The research method used for this thesis includes a review of crisis communication literature, an online survey questionnaire and interviews with law enforcement, fire service and media professionals to measure public safety's relationship with the news media in Seattle and to identify any disparities in goals and expectations for the exchange of information during a crisis. The author chose this particular group of individuals because the public turns to them first for safety information in a crisis. The agencies occupy a unique position to inform the public which makes their perceptions valuable to this research. The author has worked with a number of the survey respondents from public safety and the media on a professional basis for the past sixteen years.

The survey participants came from small, medium and large public safety agencies including the Seattle Fire Chief, Assistant Chiefs and Battalion Chiefs from the Seattle Fire Department, the Police Chief, Assistant Chiefs, Captains and Sergeants from the Seattle Police Department, the King County Sheriff and Sheriff's Deputies, police and fire Public Information Officers and Directors of Emergency Management. The agency sizes range from under 50 members to over 1,000 members. Their expertise covers a wide variety of disciplines including homeland security, criminal investigation, hazardous materials response, urban search and rescue, emergency medical response, firefighting operations, media relations and emergency management. The news media representatives interviewed here have over 25 years of experience in radio and television news reporting on such events as the Nisqually Earthquake in the Puget Sound region, the World Trade Organization Riots in Seattle and the arrest of the "millennium bomber" Ahmed Ressam, at the Washington State border.

The geographic boundary of the study covers police and fire agencies in the City of Seattle and the surrounding suburbs of King County, Washington which has a population of 1.7 million people. The broadcast news agencies represented here reach a listening and viewing audience of several million people in the western portion of Washington State.

The research results contain certain limitations because questions are confined to a small sample group. Caution should be used in drawing conclusions from the results based on these small samples. The opinions of the groups in this study may not represent the opinions of all the public safety agencies and broadcast news media within the City of Seattle and King County. However, the survey and interview questions capture an important snapshot of the local media, police and fire agency views on whether establishing a partnership is an achievable goal.

The research also includes a review of crisis communication literature to identify current conventional wisdom on lessons learned and best practices. The literature review pays particular attention to three cases that are likely to be illustrative: the Washington D.C. sniper shootings in 2003, Hurricane Katrina in 2005, and the London transport system bombings in 2005. These cases are relevant to this research because of similar incident size, community impact and how news reporting affects the incident outcomes. Although Seattle leaders cannot predict future crises they can rely on existing vulnerability analysis to anticipate likely scenarios. Examining these cases and extrapolating meaning for the Seattle urban area provides value for constructing and making recommendations to decision-makers.

The results of the online survey and interviews with media experts and public safety professionals discussed in the following chapters help measure the participant's level of interest in implementing a crisis communication plan. Most importantly, their feedback helps develop a set of recommendations for the city to address three critical areas respondents identified as currently lacking in the relationship between public safety and the media, joint planning, partnerships and training.



## **II. RELATIONS BETWEEN PUBLIC SAFETY OFFICIALS AND MEDIA DURING CRISIS: A REVIEW OF EXISTING LESSONS**

### **A. INTRODUCTION**

Many examples in the relevant literature demonstrate the critical role crisis communication plays during disasters. This chapter defines crisis communication, identifies a set of criteria for effective crisis communication and explores the sometimes opposing roles public safety officials and the media play in crisis communication. It examines how distrust between these two organizations inhibits their ability to coordinate safety information during a crisis. Incidents including Hurricane Katrina, the Washington D.C. sniper shootings and the London transport system bombings are briefly discussed as recent examples that underscore the significance and potential benefits of developing collaborative relationships between public safety and the media.

Cooperation between public safety agencies and the media reduces the psychological impacts of a crisis because both organizations are working together to provide more accurate safety information to reduce public fears. Currently, not enough research explains how to create such a nontraditional partnership. This chapter references a model of a government and media partnership from the United Kingdom for its potential applicability at local and regional levels in the U.S.

### **B. EFFECTIVE CRISIS COMMUNICATION**

#### **1. Definition**

Seeger, Sellnow, and Ulmer define crisis as “a sudden unexpected event that triggers a high level of risk, harm and opportunity for further loss.”<sup>5</sup> Careers may be threatened; livelihoods jeopardized; and health, well-being, and sense of security and predictability are shattered.<sup>6</sup> For example, the terrorist attacks on 9/11 in New York and

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<sup>5</sup> Matthew W. Seeger, Timothy L. Sellnow, and Robert R. Ulmer, *Communication and Organizational Crisis*, (Westport, CN: Praeger Publishers, 2003), 4.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

Washington DC tremendously impaired people's feelings of safety and security across the United States. Travelers simply refused to fly, and the airline industry suffered major economic losses as a result. Crisis communication theory examines what language, tactics and techniques will successfully reach such an audience (the public and other stakeholders) who may be fearful or angry. It also examines the lessons learned to handle future crises and what strategies to alter.

## 2. One-Way Versus Two-Way Communication

Grunig developed four public relations models that form the basis of most crisis communication theories. Three of the models emphasize a one-way method of communication:

- **Press Agency/Publicity Model** – one-way communication technique to promote an organization or a product, may not be truthful
- **Public Information Model** – one-way communication technique to report information journalistically, emphasis on facts
- **One-Way Asymmetric Model** – one-way communication technique to persuade the public through science, research and polls but does not use research to find out how the public feels
- **Two-Way Symmetric Model** – two-way communication technique to engage the public through dialogue, negotiation and compromise <sup>7</sup>

Experts prefer the two-way symmetric model because they use information to negotiate and promote mutual understanding and respect instead of trying to persuade and manipulate the public. Research shows the public tends to feel more secure if they are part of a decision making process and actively participate in protecting themselves in a disaster. Grunig deems the press agency/publicity model, public information model, and one-way asymmetric model less effective primarily because they do not promote interactive dialogue with the public. However, the initial stages of a crisis often lack time

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<sup>7</sup> Kathleen Fearn Banks, *Crisis Communication, a Casebook Approach* (Mahway, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1996), 16.

for two-way communication, and public safety agencies are forced by circumstances to relay information to the public and the media using the public information model. Consequently, public safety, the media and the community must establish dialogue well before a crisis.

Regardless of the model, Heath and Nathan assert that just because information is communicated does not mean it is understood. Understanding and agreement between the sender (public safety) and the receiver (the media and the public) are not synonymous. The two groups may understand but not agree.<sup>8</sup> One example highlighting this important distinction occurred during Hurricane Katrina. City officials ordered all residents of New Orleans to evacuate but thousands chose not to or were physically unable to leave. As a result, more than 1,500 people died. The Senate Homeland Security and Public Affairs Committee found the breakdown in communication between sender and receiver resulted in the missed opportunity to use as many as 200 safely positioned city buses to begin the evacuation of New Orleans after the storm had passed.<sup>9</sup>

In order for successful crisis communication to occur, information must fit the receiver's frame of reference because receivers interpret information according to their own experiences. The general public wants instructions about what to do in an emergency, but they may not receive or understand the directions that police or fire representatives give them. Even people who receive the information may not understand the message the way the sender intended. People in high stress, catastrophic situations experience "mental noise" which interferes with their ability to think and act rationally.<sup>10</sup> In a serious crisis, all affected people take in information differently, process information

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<sup>8</sup> Robert L. Heath and Kathy Nathan, "Public Relations Role in Risk Communication," *Public Relations Quarterly*, (1990-91): 19.

<sup>9</sup> Brown, et al, *A Failure of Initiative: Final Report of the Select Bipartisan Committee to Investigate Preparations for and Response to Hurricane Katrina*, 12.

<sup>10</sup> Lynn E. Davis et al, Tom Latourrette, David E. Mosher, Lois M. Davis and David R. Howell, *A Review of Risk Perception and Risk Communication Literature* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 2003), 147.

differently and act on information differently.<sup>11</sup> Crisis communicators must factor in these barriers to clear communication. Consequently, they must simply word safety messages and repeat them often.

### **3. Criteria**

Communication experts agree that planning what to say to the public and how to say it before terrorists, epidemics and other disasters strike is one of the primary criteria for successful crisis communication. Planning actually helps emergency responders do their job because the right message at the right time in a crisis functions as a “resource multiplier”.<sup>12</sup> Part of the planning process involves understanding the kind of public safety information citizens want and need to keep them safe. Most broadcast news media and public safety organizations have not identified or coordinated information in advance that should be communicated to the public about terrorism and emergency preparedness.<sup>13</sup> Few, if any, news departments have reporters who can explain what to do in the event of a bioterrorism attack or the release of a dirty bomb. Because of their expertise, police, fire, public health and emergency management officials are responsible for sharing their knowledge with the media on the wide range of complex homeland security threats. For example, what fire, police and health messages should the media disseminate to the public about the potential risks posed by chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear or explosive (CBRNE) devices? Should the public evacuate or shelter in place? What transportation information should they broadcast in the event of a city wide evacuation? Public safety agencies and the media must collaborate before a crisis on what safety messages to release and when to release them instead of trying to manage information in the middle of crisis. Both organizations share a vested interest in ensuring their information is accurate, timely and credible.

Another step in the planning process involves a tool called “message mapping” that communication experts use to help organize complex safety information for the

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<sup>11</sup> Reynolds, *Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication: By Leaders for Leaders*.

<sup>12</sup> Reynolds, *Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication: By Leaders for Leaders*, 1.

<sup>13</sup> Nancy Ethiel, *Terrorism: Informing the Public* (Chicago: McCormick Tribune Foundation, 2002), 10.

media and the public. Message mapping was designed for communicating in high stress or emotionally charged situations. Easily understandable messages are presented in three short sentences that convey three key messages in 27 words. The approach is based on surveys that show news stories usually convey three key messages in less than nine seconds for broadcast media or 27 words for print.<sup>14</sup> An example of a message map developed by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services for pandemic flu answers the question, “What can individuals do to prepare for pandemic flu?”

- Keep essential supplies at home such as food, water, medicine and a thermometer
- People can volunteer with local organizations to help with emergency response
- Prepare as you would for any emergency that affects large segments of society, such as an earthquake or blizzard

A technique like message mapping increases the chances of emergency information being heard and understood by the public.

The credibility of the spokesperson represents another crucial component in effective crisis communication. Is he or she someone the public will believe? Studies have been conducted on how the credibility of the spokesperson influences how the message is received by the public. Respondents to a King County Office of Emergency Management Survey state they would trust first responders the most to communicate important information on the television or radio in case of a serious disaster.<sup>15</sup> Reynold’s crisis and risk communication guidelines identify leaders as role models who can help change the behaviors that put people at risk. This inherent trust and the responsibility it brings, remains paramount for public safety leaders to understand and practice crisis communication. Any one of them could be put in the position of delivering the first

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<sup>14</sup> Department of Health and Human Services, *Pandemic Influenza Pre-Event Message Maps*, (January 2006).

<sup>15</sup> Bill Sofsak Sr., and Ron Butler, *King County Office of Emergency Management, Disaster and Emergency Preparedness Survey Research*, (Hebert Research Inc. Bellevue, WA: 2004), 28.

critical public message in a crisis. When a person seeks information about something they do not know the first message they receive carries more weight.<sup>16</sup>

Because the first message is so critical, Reynolds developed a set of criteria for the language spokespersons use called the simple, timely, accurate, relevant, credible, consistent (STARCC) principle. The STARCC principle recommends the spokesperson use words that are:

- **Simple** – Frightened people do not want to hear big words
- **Timely** – Frightened people want information NOW
- **Accurate** – Frightened people will not understand nuances, so give it straight
- **Relevant** – Answer questions and give action steps
- **Credible** – Empathy and openness are key to credibility
- **Consistent** – The slightest change in messaging is upsetting and dissected by all<sup>17</sup>

Leaders demonstrate a real, measurable effect on the wellbeing of the community by the words they use and the speed and sincerity with which they say them.<sup>18</sup> A quote from former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani in response to questions from reporters regarding the number of people killed in the 9/11 attacks is often used as an example of skillful crisis communication “I told the truth: when we get the final numbers it will be more than we can bear.”<sup>19</sup> The foundation for effective crisis communication is built by identifying and crafting the appropriate safety messages prior to a crisis, repeating them often and choosing the right spokesperson. In addition, the spokesperson must communicate empathy, commitment, competence, honesty and openness to the public.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Bill Sofsak Sr., and Ron Butler, *King County Office of Emergency Management, Disaster and Emergency Preparedness Survey Research*, (Hebert Research Inc. Bellevue, WA: 2004), 10.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>18</sup> Reynolds, *Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication: By Leaders for Leaders*, Washington, D.C., U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2003, 4.

<sup>19</sup> Rudolph Giuliani, *Leadership* (New York, Hyperion, 2002), 12.

<sup>20</sup> Davis, Latourrette, Mosher, Davis, and Howell, *Individual Preparedness and Response to Unconventional Terrorist Attacks*, 149.

### C. THE NEWS MEDIA, NATURAL DISASTERS AND TERRORISM

Existing research demonstrates the value of crisis communication. Covello asserts that how public safety officials and the media release information in a crisis has a tremendous impact on public behaviors. “Good communication can rally support, calm a nervous public, provide much needed information, encourage cooperative behaviors and help save lives. Poor communication can fan emotions, disrupt economies and undermine confidence.”<sup>21</sup> Findings from studies of recent disasters reflect these lessons. The report on Hurricane Katrina from the Select Bipartisan Committee identifies information gaps and the lack of initiative on the part of local, state and federal government as two major failings.<sup>22</sup> The report also finds that the lack of a public communication strategy and the media hype of violence exacerbated public concerns and further delayed relief.<sup>23</sup> National television networks aired often contradictory and confusing public messages from the White House, former FEMA Director Mike Brown, Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco and New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin. While thousands of people were stranded or dying, news clips show Director Brown on NBC’s Today Show stating, “People are getting the help they need.”<sup>24</sup> This contradiction between government rhetoric and the televised suffering of the residents of New Orleans was highly publicized and ultimately led to a congressional inquiry. Public officials demonstrated no obvious coordination and control over what they were saying or the information they were providing to the media. For example, city officials in New Orleans frightened the public by making statements to the media perpetuating rumors about violent crimes happening after Hurricane Katrina that never actually occurred. The

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<sup>21</sup> Vincent T. Covello, and Randall N. Hyer, *Effective Media Communication during Public Health Organization Crisis*, World Health Organization.

<sup>22</sup> Brown, et al, *A Failure of Initiative: Final Report of the Select Bipartisan Committee to Investigate the Preparations for and Response to Hurricane Katrina*.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>24</sup> Terry M. Neal, “Why, oh Why?” *Washington Post*, September 6, 2005, [www.Washingtonpost.com](http://www.Washingtonpost.com), [Accessed September 6, 2005].

Senate Homeland Security and Public Affairs Committee report blames the lack of effective public communications for leading to civil unrest and further delaying relief.<sup>25</sup>

## **1. The News Media and Terrorism**

Naturally occurring events like Hurricane Katrina, while serious and sometimes debilitating are indiscriminate. Experts say, however, crisis communication about terrorism is different because terrorists deliberately intend to harm. The idea that “publicity is the oxygen of terrorist groups” raises the question of how much terrorists influence media coverage.<sup>26</sup> Media organizations view it as their responsibility to shine a spotlight on the government’s policies and practices on terrorism. Wilkinson states “the media and terrorists have a symbiotic relationship; they mutually depend on each other [and] ... the terrorists manipulate the media to further their propaganda war.”<sup>27</sup>

Two examples highlight instances where terrorists have taken advantage of the opportunities for publicity provided by the freedom of the American press. Americans received their first look at the man who claimed responsibility for the attacks on 9/11 when news networks aired an unedited videotaped interview with Osama Bin Laden in which he declares a holy war. It was feared that Bin Laden was using the American media to send encrypted messages to terrorists through his taped interviews.<sup>28</sup> Not long afterwards terrorists released a videotape of the beheading of *Wall Street Journal* reporter Daniel Pearl, whom they killed in January, 2002. American broadcast networks played portions of the tape and the internet aired the entire tape. The Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) pulled the video from the internet after a shocked and outraged public complained. Critics argue that media coverage of shocking images act as an advertising campaign to recruit volunteers, and it gives terrorists the media attention they

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<sup>25</sup> Brown, et al, *A Failure of Initiative: Final Report of the Select Bipartisan Committee to Investigate the Preparations for and Response to Hurricane Katrina*, 15.

<sup>26</sup> Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, *Speech to the American Bar Association*, (Speech to American Bar Association, London, July 15, 1985).

<sup>27</sup> Paul Wilkinson, *Terrorism and Political Violence* (London: Frank Cass, 1997), 9.

<sup>28</sup> Michelle Marie Tasista, *Global Media and Public Affairs Communication in a New Era of Defense* Master’s Thesis (University of Colorado Press, 2002), 74.



want.<sup>29</sup> Terrorists want to send the message to the public that no place is safe and anyone can be a target, anyplace, anywhere, at any time. The amount of media coverage viewed through this lens becomes a measure of terrorists' success.

Still Wilkinson makes an important distinction. He argues that while a definite relationship between media and terrorism exists, "...modern mass media is not the underlying cause of terrorism...it is well beyond the powers even of the modern mass media to create a terrorist movement."<sup>30</sup> He cites the example of Russian and Balkan terrorists in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to prove that terrorism existed long before the media. It is important to note terrorists' ability to leverage the media for their causes because the media also plays an important role in combating terrorism. Two relevant examples emerge from recent history that demonstrates how media reporting and related actions can have a positive effect. First, reporting on terrorism can and does raise the level of public awareness. Law enforcement agencies use the media to warn the public to look out for suspicious packages, persons or behaviors. Second, after the London bombings, police used the media to broadcast surveillance camera photos of the suspects in the attacks. This tactic led to the acquisition of valuable information. Despite the publicity, the extensive media coverage did not result in public support of the terrorists.

Alternately, news coverage of the two planes crashing into the World Trade Center boosted the terrorists' agenda. That horrifying image was continuously broadcast for months. The public reacted by simply refusing to fly. As of 2005, the airline industry still had not recovered. An earlier example, the hijacking of TWA Flight 847 in 1985 demonstrates the media's power to change the course of events. Hoffman's seminal text *Inside Terrorism* includes more than 500 news stories featuring the hijacking. Reporters interviewed hostages and the terrorists daily during the 17-day standoff. The intense media coverage and public sympathy for the American hostages caused the Reagan administration to accede to the terrorists' demands.<sup>31</sup> The United States Government

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<sup>29</sup> Paul Marsden, "A Deadly Contagion: The Risk of Copycat Terrorism," *The Psychologist* 18 (2005), 1.

<sup>30</sup> Wilkinson, *Terrorism and Political Violence*

<sup>31</sup> Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 132.

convinced Israel to release 756 Shi'a prisoners in return for freeing 39 American hostages. Media coverage of the hostage situation became the opinion shaper and policy driver for U.S. Government decision making.<sup>32</sup>

#### **D. INFORMATION SHARING**

Several publications highlight the importance of the public message and the need to work with media during a crisis. Since protecting lives remains public safety's primary responsibility in a disaster, it is crucial that officials share as much information as possible. "There are two good reasons to cooperate with media during a crisis. One, they are your primary tool to get public safety messages to your community in a hurry. Two, they know their audiences better than you do."<sup>33</sup> In a 2005 working group report from the Emergency Management Accreditation Program, researchers argue that "...the message and information given by leaders in a crisis is paramount and can have a direct impact on successful outcomes in a disaster."<sup>34</sup> *Terrorism: Informing the Public* concludes that public officials and media need to work together on local, state and national levels to keep the public informed during emergency, evidence that partnerships are important to improved outcomes in a crisis.<sup>35</sup> Ethiel suggests cooperation and collaboration with the media can effectively foster communication with the public during a crisis and further homeland security goals.<sup>36</sup> The authors generally agree that public officials should involve the media *before* an event to insure better information exchange *during* an event.

Through past experience as a broadcast news journalist, the author observes that the majority of broadcast news reporters do not specialize in any one field. As a result, they possess very little technical knowledge of the potential natural or man-made health

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<sup>32</sup> Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 133.

<sup>33</sup> Reynolds, *Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication: By Leaders for Leaders*, 35.

<sup>34</sup> Council of State Governors, *Emergency Preparedness and Public Communication*, (Lexington, Kentucky, Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, October, 2006), 8.

<sup>35</sup> Ethiel, *Terrorism: Informing the Public*, 15.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

and safety issues that pose such grave public threats. This lack of knowledge leaves reporters ill-prepared to give accurate reports to the public in a major emergency. In a disaster, broadcast media strive to fill a 24-hour news cycle with updated and ongoing information. Leaders can fill this information vacuum by identifying subject matter experts from their own departments prior to a crisis who can provide reporters with accurate, factual information. Leaders then control how well their communities respond and recover from a disaster which has a direct impact on restoring local economy.<sup>37</sup> Reynold's observation suggests that, in addition to helping prepare public safety officials to communicate effectively in a crisis, there are tangible benefits to helping the media become better prepared.

Because the concept of forming partnerships or collaborating with the media can be problematic, the idea has not been widely explored or discussed as a strategy for emergency preparedness. This is due in part to the media's historically conflicted relationship with government. As a result, there may be reluctance on the part of some leaders to join forces with a news organization that has been critical of them. Persuading broadcast news media to partner with public safety in delivering the right safety messages to the public also presents a challenge. There must be some benefit for a private media corporation to engage in a partnership with public safety. In later chapters, interviews with public safety leaders and news media managers help determine what strategies benefit both organizations to encourage forming a partnership.

## **E. PUBLIC SAFETY AND MEDIA ROLES IN CRISIS**

Besides providing disaster response, public safety agency responsibilities include fear management, public education and media management in the initial stages of a crisis. The broadcast media must air live information as quickly as possible to meet the demands of their news consuming public. Disaster coverage amplifies the outrage, anger and fear that the broadcast media depends on to attract an audience which boosts viewer ratings to raise advertising rates. However, both organizations share the same immediate goal of

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<sup>37</sup> Ethiel, *Terrorism: Informing the Public*, 4.

finding answers to the public's questions such as what happened; what is the danger; where should I go; what route should I take; will I need medicine and what about my family?<sup>38</sup> The post 9/11 world challenges the traditionally wary approach between public safety and the media regarding sharing information. Crisis events now include the unthinkable: planes flying into buildings, bombs set off on trains, and anthrax sent through the mail. Communicating these new and unfamiliar threats requires both organizations to share and coordinate information in a different way in order to protect the public.

Ethiel claims that the rise of terrorism has contributed to the changing roles of the media and public safety. She says public safety should recognize news reporters as first responders because they are an integral part of disaster response, often arriving on scene before police, fire and emergency medical services. The media's capability to respond expeditiously to an emergency scene and quickly disseminate information to the public makes them an invaluable resource to public safety agencies.

Sandman and Covello find that this capacity for relaying instant information gives the media the power to change the course of events rather than simply report on them after they have happened. A critique in the *American Journalism Review* of media coverage of the Washington DC sniper shooting praises the media for positively influencing the outcome of one of the biggest criminal investigations in the country. The Police in Montgomery County, Maryland, issued more than 1,300 press passes and held 59 news conferences over three weeks. Law enforcement utilized the media's live news conferences to send messages to the snipers. In exchange for their cooperation, police provided the media with better access to information. News radio stations broadcasted the description of the car and license plate number used by the snipers, information officials had not released. A truck driver heard the description and phoned in a tip to police. A short time later, police arrested the two men suspected of killing 13 people.

However, Library of Congress case studies of the media warn that the news media's role is not to help or impede rescuers or investigators in an emergency. The

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<sup>38</sup> Frank Sesno, "The CIP Report," *Zeicher Risk Analytics* (November/December 2004) 2.

media's central function is to inform the public about events.<sup>39</sup> Yet public safety leaders must acknowledge and make use of the media's capabilities to provide immediate safety warnings and give direction as to what protective actions the public should take. In a crisis, accurate information can save lives.

The news media view their role as a combination of political watchdog, gatekeeper and observer to present the public with a critical view of government policies and practices. News reporters are wary of forming close professional relationships within public safety agencies because they must remain impartial and skeptical to maintain their neutrality. Public safety agencies are equally reluctant to form close professional relationships with the media because they fear media interference with their investigations. They perceive the media as likely to criticize and blame them once the emergency is over.<sup>40</sup> However, Reynolds, Sandman, and Covello agree that the media represents a valuable resource to public safety in a crisis because they wield power to alleviate the situation.

The relationship between public safety agencies and the media will always reflect some degree of contention in a crisis situation. They have different sets of interests and opposing views on what information should be presented.<sup>41</sup> However, the First Amendment guarantees that the media in the U.S. will continue playing a major role in disseminating information in a crisis, and public safety agencies will continue as their primary source of information, despite the potential conflict between the public's right to know and the right of public safety officials to withhold information that could jeopardize a homeland security investigation.

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<sup>39</sup> LaVerle Berry, Amanda Jones and Terence Powers, *Media interaction with the Public in Emergency Situations, Four Case Studies* (Washington D.C.: Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 1999), 34.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>41</sup> Daniel Castro, *The Impact of Police and Media Relations in a Crisis* Master's Thesis (Monterey, CA: Naval Postgraduate School, March 2006), xvii.

## **F. PARTNERSHIP MODEL**

Ample research covers the media and crisis communication. However, the literature has not led the United States to establish recognized guidelines or models for forming cooperative media and public safety partnerships. In the absence of a standardized approach, U.S. media sometimes develop their own rules. The Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) for example, developed an ad hoc policy to avoid giving excessive airtime to terrorists, avoid live coverage of the terrorists and obey police instructions. Because Britain has dealt with terrorist attacks by the Irish Republican Army for the better part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the country has considerable experience with emergency planning. Therefore it is instructive to examine the British government's model for sharing information with news media and the public during emergencies.

The government in the United Kingdom initiated a series of formal and informal voluntary public information and warning partnerships (PIWPs) in 1996 between the government, public safety and the media to “warn and inform” the public in a crisis. The PIWPs provide a critical link to the public in an emergency. In the past they have been used to disseminate important information about Britain's Foot and Mouth epidemic, IRA bomb threats and severe flooding. Through these partnerships the media and emergency planners developed a series of guidelines that include what triggers an emergency broadcast, how to verify the information, who to contact and when to update the information.

Maintaining these partnerships includes annual national Media Emergency Forums (MEFs) with government, public safety, emergency management and the media to create standardized emergency protocols and lay the foundation for more cooperative relationships. Because law enforcement and media organizations in the U.K. have regular contact through emergency forums in times of peace, they have established a level of recognition and trust allowing them to work together more successfully when crisis occurs. The communication between safety agencies and the media proved effective in notifying and calming the public on the morning of July 7, 2005 when the City of London Police, the Metropolitan Police, the British Transport Police, the Ministry

of Defense Police, the London Fire Brigade, the London Ambulance Service, and hundreds of media responded to a report of four bombs detonated in central London. The first media report came out minutes after the attack. Through a PIWP program with the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) called “Connecting in a Crisis”, emergency information was immediately broadcasted over the radio. A center to coordinate the release of information to the media was established after the bombings as a result of an idea from a prior national MEF. Londoners returned to riding the buses and the underground the following day.

The key to the PIWP’s success is constant reevaluation. Safety agencies and the media meet within six weeks of a major incident to review and revise emergency protocols. For example, there was a two hour gap following the explosions in London between what the media knew and what the police were prepared to confirm publicly. Because of this gap, the public questioned the credibility of information provided later by police. *The Report of the 7 July Review Committee* on the bombings states, “It is absolutely essential that they [the media] are involved in emergency planning and provided with accurate, up-to-date advice and information to pass on to the public as soon as possible.”<sup>42</sup> The report recommends that in the future police should provide basic advice to the media within an hour of a major incident. The goal of the PIWPs is to apply the lessons learned from incidents like the bombings to future emergencies.

In the U.S. there are no universally agreed upon media protocols or policies for news reporting in a crisis. In addition, there is not a collective movement among the broadcast news media and public safety to establish guidelines for disaster coverage or enforce them. The absence of coherent, objective and mutually agreed upon policy can interfere with public safety and the media’s ability to work together which is why partnering between the two groups is so important. *The Police Executive Report Forum* finds that the relationship between law enforcement and the media requires making an

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<sup>42</sup> Greater London Authority, *Report of the 7 July Review Committee* (London: Greater London Authority, 2006), 78.

investment in building trust, establishing ground rules and expertise, meeting outside of emergencies and working to come up with a strategy for covering major events.<sup>43</sup>

In summary, this chapter defines crisis communication and describes some of the basic public relation's theories that make communication so challenging. It identifies criteria for effective crisis communication such as pre-planning safety messages, using the appropriate language, and choosing a credible spokesperson. This chapter also examines public safety and media roles in a crisis and the impact these roles have on their ability to work together. It provides a brief overview of a successful government/media model in Britain. Finally, it identifies the lack of an existing local, regional or state model in the U.S. for how to establish good working relationships between public safety agencies and the media to better manage the release of information in a crisis. Future chapters more fully explore building a partnership.

The next chapter reviews the results of a survey taken by police and fire personnel who serve the citizens in King County, Washington to explore their current perceptions of broadcast news media in Seattle and the likelihood of forming partnerships. The chapter also examines how members of the news media view their present relationship with public safety agencies and the measures they say would improve the relationship.

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<sup>43</sup> Chuck Wexler, Gerald R. Murphy, Heather J. Davies and Martha Plotkin *Managing a Multi-Jurisdictional Case, Lessons Learned from the Sniper Investigation* (Washington D.C.: Police Executive Research Forum, 2004).



### **III. KING COUNTY SURVEY**

#### **A. SURVEY METHODOLOGY**

An online survey was the primary method used to gather responses. The series of 21 questions consists of a combination of multiple choice, yes or no and open-ended questions. The survey including a summary of responses is provided in Appendix A. The author conducted follow up one-on-one interviews with the Seattle Fire Chief, the Seattle Chief of Police, the News Director of CBS affiliate, KIRO news radio, and the Managing Editor of ABC affiliate, KOMO TV, to gather more qualitative data on issues identified in the survey.

The survey asks questions based on communication challenges that arose during the events discussed in the literature review, the historically tense relationship between public safety and the news media and observations from the author's sixteen years of experience working in broadcast news and as a public information officer for the fire service. The questions specifically address the state of the current relationship between the two groups and the level of experience public safety agencies have in dealing with the media. Several questions measure the value each group puts on the idea of developing a more cooperation and what can improve any problems in the relationship. Other questions focus on whether the emphasis on homeland security changes the nature of the relationship.

The survey targets those public safety officials who have exposure to broadcast news media and are in a position to make independent decisions regarding emergency communication such as Chiefs, Assistant Chiefs, Battalion Chiefs, Captains and Public Information Officers. The survey was self administered through the internet using the online survey tool, *Zoomerang*. Participants were asked to respond anonymously and identify themselves only by rank and agency (law enforcement or fire). *Zoomerang* collected, analyzed and cross-tabulated the quantitative public safety survey data.

Fire and police agencies throughout King County were surveyed first followed by personal interviews with members of the news media and interviews with the fire chief and police chief. The interviews averaged one hour and the author conducted them between November, 2005 and November, 2006. Analyses of the combined qualitative and quantitative data helped identify common themes and differing perspectives concerning the relationship between organizations. The individual interviews supply more substantive details to support the qualitative data.

## **B. SUMMARY OF SURVEY RESULTS**

The goal of this research is to gauge the willingness of public safety agencies and the media to engage in a joint effort to provide better crisis information to the public. The survey questions are designed to single out strengths and weaknesses in the current relationship in order to provide possible solutions. Primary stakeholders (public safety and the broadcast news media) completed surveys and interviews to pinpoint issues that assist in further developing public safety and media relations. While the public is also an important stakeholder in emergency preparedness, this study targets public safety and broadcast media.

Respondents chose answers on a graduated scale. Choices ranged from “Never, Seldom, Frequently, and Very Frequently” to “Strongly Disagree, Tend to Disagree, Tend to Agree, and Strongly Agree.” Another series of questions asked where the quality of the relationship between public safety agencies and the media fell on a continuum between congenial versus tense, strong versus weak, satisfactory versus unsatisfactory, trusting versus untrusting, and excellent versus poor. Open ended questions required brief answers from the respondents.

## C. KEY FINDINGS

### 1. Media Relations Experience

The public safety agencies surveyed all have some form of contact with the media. Seventy-nine percent of the respondents say their agency has a media relations plan. Agencies in larger cities with more exposure to the press have a dedicated media relations unit or a designated public information officer to handle most media inquiries. When asked who they consider the best spokesperson to answer media inquiries, 75 percent name the public information officer followed by department heads, then other ranked officers. Well over half of the public safety groups say they respond to media requests for information daily or weekly. Respondents had less experience being interviewed personally by a news radio or television news reporter which requires a higher level of communication skill. Fifty-seven percent say they seldom if ever perform on-camera or radio interviews and 42 percent seldom or never send media releases. These numbers suggest that the majority of public safety's regular contact with the broadcast news media is providing information over the telephone rather than face to face, making it difficult to establish trust between agencies. Table 1 outlines the answers from public safety respondents regarding their level of familiarity with the media.

	Never	Seldom (Monthly)	Frequently (Weekly)	Very Frequently (Daily)
<b>How frequently does your agency send media releases</b>	2%	40%	43%	14%
<b>How frequently does you agency perform on-camera or radio interviews</b>	2%	55%	31%	12%
<b>How frequently does your agency respond to media inquiries</b>	5%	5%	47%	26%

Table 1. Public Safety Contact with the News Media

One objective of the research was to establish whether public safety views the broadcast news media as important to their homeland security mission. Despite the broad scope of new safety concerns and training the discipline of homeland security requires, 63 percent of the respondents answer that the state and local emphasis on homeland security has not changed the nature of their relationship or generated new policies for interacting with media organizations. In contrast, the media respondents say the public safety concerns are different since the 9/11 attacks, and as a result, they have more contact with federal and state agencies such as the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF), the United States Attorney's Office and Public Health and Emergency Management. Over 51 percent of the public safety respondents consider media relations important to their agency's homeland security mission. The responses from public safety contradict each other in light of the number of respondents who say that media relations are important to homeland security, and yet their relationship with the media remains unchanged despite the national focus on strengthening preparedness.

## **2. How Well Do Organizations Understand Each Other**

Regular operational training is a requirement for both police and firefighters to maintain skills, learn new technologies and familiarize themselves with emerging threats. It is reasonable to assume that the media who provide local news coverage should have general knowledge of their local agency's response capabilities and training procedures for the various threats to homeland security. It is also reasonable to expect that the public safety agencies in turn have an understanding of how the news media conduct their operations. However, the public safety agencies surveyed very seldom invite the media to participate in emergency exercises or conduct media relations training for their own employees and the news media rarely invites public safety officials to view their newsroom operations. The survey answers indicate a lack of familiarity with each other's organizations.

- Ninety-seven percent of the public safety agencies say they seldom if ever invite the media to participate in drills or tabletop exercises
- Media respondents say they are asked to play the role of “mock media” in exercises but are not invited to participate in any pre-disaster planning or post-exercise debriefings
- Only 2 percent of the respondents say the media completely understands the command structure and operational procedures for law enforcement and the fire service
- Media respondents say that news reporters probably do not know the individual roles and responsibilities of each public safety agency as well as they should.
- Ninety-eight percent of the public safety respondents seldom if ever conduct media training for their employees

While respondents from the groups agree that understanding each other’s operations is important, the survey results indicate a significant disconnect with what is actually happening. In reality, neither organization seems to have a clear picture of the other’s protocols and procedures or what resources they would use to respond to a disaster.

### **3. Perception Shapes Reality**

In an effort to describe their existing relationship, the public safety and media respondents were asked what they consider current best practices for maintaining a successful relationship and to articulate what needs to improve. The following tables list the top three most repeated answers and other secondary responses from public safety and media participants. Table 2 describes how public safety respondents perceive their relationship with the media. Table 3 shows the media perspective on their relationship with public safety.

	Top Three Responses	Other responses
<b>Three key elements essential for a successful relationship with the media</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Trust</li> <li>• Accuracy</li> <li>• Accessibility</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Flexibility</li> <li>• Early notification</li> <li>• Freedom to talk to media</li> </ul>
<b>Three policies or guidelines used to maintain a good relationship with the media</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Information</li> <li>• Accessibility</li> <li>• Maintain relationship</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Accuracy</li> <li>• Timeliness</li> <li>• Respect</li> </ul>
<b>How could the relationship with the media be improved</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cross training</li> <li>• Building relationships</li> <li>• Media relations training</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interviews with chief officers</li> <li>• Positive stories</li> <li>• Proactive</li> </ul>
<b>What do the media expect from public safety in a crisis</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Access 24/7</li> <li>• Accuracy</li> <li>• Timeliness</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Trust</li> <li>• Consistency</li> <li>• Leadership</li> </ul>
<b>What does public safety expect from the media in a crisis</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Accuracy</li> <li>• Balanced reporting</li> <li>• Patience</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Exploitation</li> <li>• Positive coverage</li> <li>• No expectation</li> </ul>
<b>What is public safety's greatest area of vulnerability concerning the media</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inaccuracy</li> <li>• Negative coverage</li> <li>• Lack of resources</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of foresight</li> <li>• Disgruntled employees</li> <li>• Consistency</li> </ul>

Table 2. How Public Safety Perceives Relationships with the News Media

	Top Three Responses	Other responses
<b>Three key elements essential for a successful relationship with public safety</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Accessibility</li> <li>• Accuracy</li> <li>• Trust</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Willingness to create a partnership</li> <li>• Willingness to provide information</li> <li>• Access to interviews with decision makers</li> </ul>
<b>Three policies or guidelines used to maintain a good relationship with public safety</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Be respectful</li> <li>• Report information accurately and fairly</li> <li>• Meet face to face</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Invite public safety to tour newsroom</li> <li>• Maintain police and fire “beat” reporters</li> <li>• Attend emergency forums</li> </ul>
<b>How could the relationship with public safety be improved</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Open communication</li> <li>• Correct factual errors in news coverage</li> <li>• Develop personal relationships</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop sources within the organization</li> <li>• Take care of the relationship</li> </ul>

<b>What do the media expect from public safety in a crisis</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Quick access to information</li> <li>• Honesty</li> <li>• Centralized information</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Information needs to be updated frequently</li> <li>• Remove bureaucracy</li> <li>• Authorization for public safety officials to talk to the media</li> </ul>
<b>What does public safety expect from the media in a crisis</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stay out of the way</li> <li>• Media follows public safety rules and hierarchy</li> <li>• Broadcast critical safety information in an accurate and timely manner</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wait for public safety to provide information</li> </ul>
<b>What is the media's area of greatest vulnerability concerning public safety</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of knowledge</li> <li>• Untrustworthy reporters</li> <li>• Losing ability to broadcast during a disaster</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of resources</li> <li>• Lack of protective clothing</li> <li>• No disaster plan</li> </ul>

Table 3. How the News Media Perceives Relationships with Public Safety

The tables above indicate strong similarities in the answers given by public safety and the media. Respondents from both groups agree that the top three prerequisites for building a relationship are trustworthiness, accuracy of information and the timeliness of the information. The other factors public safety identify that were of lesser importance include the media's ability to be flexible with the timing of the release of information that



they are given, the freedom for all public safety officials to talk to the media instead of restricting it solely to the public information officer and notifying public safety officials before the news media broadcasts certain safety information that could jeopardize an investigation. Other responses from the media include public safety's willingness to engage with the news media and to allow them greater access to interviews with decision makers such as chiefs and assistant chiefs.

The primary policies public safety agencies identify as successful in maintaining a relationship with the news media include to regularly provide the news media with information, and allow reporters improved access to interviews and emergency scenes, for example, moving perimeter tape at an incident so media can move closer to obtain better video or pictures. Other respondents identify providing the media with accurate, timely information, respecting their profession and trying to meet their needs as ingredients for success. The media respondents say their three best practices for maintaining a relationship with public safety are showing respect to public safety officials, reporting information accurately and fairly and establishing personal contact by meeting face to face. The media advises giving public safety officials news room tours so they become more familiar with news media operations. Their final recommendation focuses on fostering familiarity by dedicating a reporter to cover police and fire issues exclusively as well as attending joint emergency forums.

When asked what would improve relationships with the media, public safety respondent's top three choices include cross training to learn each other's disciplines, building better relationships and media relations training so officials are more comfortable interacting with news reporters. Other respondents suggest that the media report more positive stories about public safety agencies. Public safety agencies should proactively approach the media with story ideas about their agencies and offer the media a chief officer for interviews rather than a public information officer. (Some public safety organizations have a policy that only allows the public information officer to talk to the media.) Open communication, correcting factual errors in news coverage and personal

relationships are the media's proposals for improving relationships. Other ideas presented by the media are developing sources for information within public safety organizations and taking care of the relationship.

The next question in the table describes both the positive and negative expectations each organization has for the other's behavior in a crisis. The public safety respondents expect the media to demand that officials supply a steady stream of accurate, updated information around the clock. The media respondents counter that public safety officials expect them to wait for official information before reporting anything and in the meantime follow public safety's rules and stay out of the way. Other public safety respondents say they either expect the media to exploit them or have no expectations of them at all. What *should* happen according to the public safety respondents is that the media exhibit patience with the time it takes for officials to gather information. The information should be presented to the public in an accurate and balanced manner. From the media perspective, public safety officials should be honest with them. They should provide quick access to information (even though the information may be deemed inaccurate later) that comes from one centralized location. The media also identifies bureaucracy as a key obstacle to information gathering. Some public safety organizations have a policy that only allows the public information officer to talk to the media.

The final question from Tables 2 and 3 asks respondents about issues in their current relationship that makes them feel the most vulnerable. Public safety says their greatest vulnerability in regards to the news media is the reporting of inaccurate information. Inaccuracies can impact citizen safety and the fire and police department's own safety concerns. They also cite the public relations damage from negative news coverage, a lack of foresight on the media's part as to the consequences of their reporting and an inadequate number of departmental resources to address the large number of media inquiries. Disgruntled firefighters and police officers who use the news media as a forum to air their complaints and the news media's inconsistent coverage completes the list of vulnerabilities public safety officials view as threats to their organization. Media respondents say ignorance of public safety's disaster plans puts them at a severe disadvantage in reporting accurate information. Untrustworthy reporters are another

liability because they damage relationships with public safety and erode the credibility of the news organization. The broadcast media also name significant problems created by losing the ability to broadcast during an emergency. The lack of a newsroom disaster plan that includes protective clothing for reporters exposes them to even greater hazards. Similar to their public safety counterparts, media organizations also worry about a lack of resources to handle a major emergency.

#### **4. Building Relationships**

Despite some of the challenges discussed in this chapter, both the public safety and news media respondents indicate a mutual willingness (with some concerns about maintaining professional boundaries) to build stronger relationships.

- Sixty-seven percent of the respondents either tend to agree or strongly agree that the likelihood of their agency initiating the effort to develop a media partnership is high
- Thirty-five percent say they would be more willing to engage in a partnership with the media if it was a combined regional public safety effort
- Media respondents strongly agree with the above, with the caveat that public safety agencies would have to trust the media and share more information than they are traditionally comfortable with for an equal partnership

The respondents' answers clearly convey an interest in partnering through planning and training, yet there are no established local or regional examples of public safety and media partnerships to model.

The following chapter reviews the information gathered during individual interviews with public safety department heads and media managers. The author chose these individuals for their professional experience and responsibility for addressing homeland security issues in each of their organizations.

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## **IV. INTERVIEW RESULTS**

This chapter summarizes the results of in depth interviews with public safety and media executives. The author chose these subjects because an organization's leaders must endorse a new approach to fire and police agency interactions with the news media before such an initiative can move forward. The Seattle Fire Chief, Chief of Police and news media executives answered the same series of questions as contained in the online *Zoomerang* survey. The interviews were conducted in person in order to elicit more comprehensive answers to the issues raised in the survey. The same themes discussed in the previous pages, emerged during conversations between the author and the interview respondents. Executives identify accuracy of information, accessibility to information and timeliness of information as key components to building trust.

Much of the data collected from these interviews supports the value of establishing and maintaining ongoing collaborative relationships between agencies. The conversations helped clarify the characteristics that all parties agree must be the foundation for more effective relationships between the news media and public safety agencies.

### **A. ACCURACY AND TRUST: GETTING IT RIGHT THE FIRST TIME**

It is important to note that “accuracy of information” was the most repeated answer to the survey and interview questions. Public safety respondents often linked the word “accuracy” with the word “trust”. Both the surveys and interviews establish that one of the precursors for public safety's trust in the news media is that the news is reported in an accurate, fair and balanced manner. Who decides what is fair and balanced reporting is difficult to determine. Oftentimes, fire and police officials disagree with the media as to the definition of responsible reporting, especially when the story is critical of public safety. To compound the problem, the broadcast news media has a reputation, sometimes deservedly, for getting the facts wrong. The Seattle Police Chief describes inaccuracies as inherent to the nature of the news media, “You have to accept that there

are going to be times when you're hung out to dry, don't expect more from that relationship.”<sup>44</sup> In response, media managers say they always wonder if law enforcement is withholding information from them. According to the survey, 83 percent of public safety respondents say they withhold information from the news media for a variety of different reasons. The media, in turn, protect the anonymity of their sources by withholding their names from public safety officials. A certain amount of justifiable suspicion belongs on both sides of the fence. However, public safety officials must grasp that news reporters have an equal stake in reporting the news accurately. Inaccurate information in a story destroys a reporter's credibility with the local police and fire public information officers they depend on as sources. The media needs to understand that public safety agencies will withhold information if they feel it has the potential to jeopardize a criminal investigation.

The interview respondents agree that while accuracy is a component to building trust, trust ultimately boils down to establishing and maintaining relationships. Participants in both groups endorse trust-building through ongoing, one-on-one contact between fire, police, and the media outside of stressful emergencies. “Our jobs [public safety and the news media] are so much alike in so many ways, our job is to give public information to save lives. We have different accountabilities but share the same fears and concerns.”<sup>45</sup> Ultimately it is the community who benefits the most from the two organizations overcoming their mutual mistrust.

## **B. ACCESSIBILITY: HOW MUCH INFORMATION IS ENOUGH**

Some media critics propose two effective ways to ensure that the news media disseminates the appropriate public safety message: to provide accurate information and to prevent the media from encouraging panic and reporting rumors by offering them something that they really need such as access to additional information or better photo opportunities. Accessibility and availability of information have long been bones of

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<sup>44</sup> Gil Kerlikowske (Seattle Chief of Police), interview by author, Seattle, WA, December 7, 2006.

<sup>45</sup> Bob Throndsen (Managing Editor, KOMO TV), interview by author, Seattle, WA, November 18, 2005.

contention between law enforcement and the news media. Today's news runs in a continuous loop. The availability of information around the clock, whether from a department spokesperson or a press release, is essential to running a broadcast news operation. One media respondent admits that there will never be enough information to satisfy the news media. "We always want more information and authorities generally don't want to give us more."<sup>46</sup> The danger to a public safety agency ignoring the news media's demand for information is that reporters find it somewhere else and it may not be accurate.

The interviews reveal a consistent concern regarding how much information is appropriate to release without jeopardizing an investigation. One chief commented, "Before we can agree to share more information we have to have the understanding and the trust that the media can separate out what they can and can't report. Until then you can never have a relationship."<sup>47</sup> Information is frequently withheld from the media without explanation or public safety officials refuse to comment which leads to further suspicion and distrust. Training the mid-level firefighters and police officers can help alleviate distrust by giving them the confidence to know what to say and how to interact with the media.<sup>48</sup> A media respondent remarked that while chiefs are generally open to talking to the media, the mid-level culture of police officers and firefighters who work in the trenches are referred to as the "frozen middle" because they are reluctant to talk to the news media. The media most often wants to interview these people because they are on the front lines performing rescues, firefighting, identifying a suspected hazardous material or investigating a crime.

Another media respondent identifies a frequent source of tension at an incident scene. Law enforcement expects the media to follow fire and police agency rules and hierarchy when they are gathering news. However, every broadcast news reporter and photographer's job is to get as close to an emergency scene as possible, for better video and interviews than their news competitors. Perimeter tape at an emergency prompts the

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<sup>46</sup> Ursula Reutin (News Director, KIRO Newsradio), interview by author, Seattle, WA, November 24, 2006.

<sup>47</sup> Gregory Dean (Seattle Fire Chief), interview by author, Seattle, WA, December 4, 2006.

<sup>48</sup> Castro, *The Impact of Police and Media Relations during a Crisis*

media to find an alley that takes them around the tape. This conflict can be partially avoided. Regular media updates at a designated location can help defuse this conflict.

### **C. TIMELINESS: SOMETHING IS BETTER THAN NOTHING**

Because public safety's primary concern during a disaster is protecting the public, the media provides the most immediate tool for telling the public what to do, what not to do and where to go. The news media is a direct conduit for relaying time sensitive safety information to the public. Therefore, their first priority for gathering news in a crisis is finding out where they can go to obtain the fastest, most reliable information. The news media expects public safety agencies to share as many details about an incident as they can, as quickly as they can.

Public officials may be reluctant to release information in the initial stages of an incident when they do not have all the facts and their focus is on mitigating the disaster. However, media and crisis communication experts unanimously agree that giving the public some basic information early on in a crisis is better than no information. They feel the bigger danger lies in police and fire withholding information rather than putting out the wrong information. The media respondents feel that waiting to release information to the public in the midst of a crisis is a mistake. The standard response from public officials, "We'll get back to you in an hour" will not satisfy the news media. They will seek the information somewhere else, and it may very well be from an uninformed witness, spectator or a "person on the street" who is not a public safety subject matter expert. The media suggests that public officials should not fear saying "I don't know or I don't have that information yet". Admitting openly that not enough information is available buys time with the media until the facts can be confirmed. However, public safety officials must clearly explain to the media that a quick response does entail some liability because information constantly changes in a situation as dynamic as an emergency.



#### **D. COOPERATION AND COLLABORATION**

The interview subjects acknowledge that relationships require compromise from both parties. Though their relationship is built on conflict, public safety and the broadcast news media depend on each other. It has been the author's experience that public safety agencies recognize in theory that strengthening homeland security depends on federal, state and local agencies becoming partners. No single agency can mitigate a significant incident. Putting theory into practice with agencies who do not normally work collaboratively is a challenge. Though both groups clearly express the value in working more cooperatively, they agree that a certain degree of tension will always exist in their relationship based on the nature of their respective professions. The police chief commented, "The best that we can hope for is a professional relationship where we understand each other's roles."<sup>49</sup> One media respondent observed that "partnership" implies a certain level of trust, and that public safety would have to share more information with the media than they are currently comfortable with in order to build that trust.

Both organizations identify cross training and participating in joint disaster exercises and drills as smart practices for learning each other's roles and responsibilities, overcoming tension and establishing trust. One chief suggests bringing in third parties such as university subject matter experts to facilitate training. Neutral instructors negate any suspicion that either party was promoting their own agenda through the training. A radio news director identifies the logistics of the training as the biggest obstacle to a new relationship with public safety. She says the key is having someone to coordinate the two agencies and developing realistic goals for the partnership.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Kerlikowske, interview by author

<sup>50</sup> Reutin, interview by author

## **E. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS**

Chapters III and IV review data gathered through personal interviews with police, fire and media representatives and an online survey sent via e-mail to King County police, fire and broadcast media agencies. Respondents' answers describe the current state of the public safety/broadcast news media relationship, the impact of homeland security, the expectations for information in a crisis, and the likelihood of developing a public safety and media partnership. The author's analysis of the study identifies obstacles and the actions that remove barriers.

Three areas for improvement emerge from the survey and interview findings: planning, training, and partnerships. The respondents acknowledge these problems exist but express a sense of openness to exploring new ways of interacting with each other. Currently public safety and the news media do not participate in any joint disaster planning and training though respondents from both organizations see the advantages. Interestingly enough, the two groups articulate the same difficulties with trust, accuracy of information and understanding of each other's roles and responsibilities. The most encouraging finding in this study suggests that the public safety agencies and the broadcast news media representatives indicate a willingness to improve their current relationship and coordinate the information they disseminate in a crisis.

The following chapter introduces a strategy for a crisis communication plan to foster relationships between public safety and the news media. It outlines a set of practical, proactive recommendations for improving interagency communication to benefit citizens, public safety and the media as well as to support future homeland security efforts. Better communication, media relations and training have a direct impact on increasing preparedness for homeland security issues.

## **V. RECOMMENDATIONS**

Previous chapters describe how communication failures and successes clearly impact the safety of communities in crisis. Conflicting information from officials and the news media during Hurricane Katrina confused the desperate residents of New Orleans regarding evacuation locations and transportation at a time when they most needed direction and leadership. In contrast, public safety and news media collaboration during the London bus bombings and the DC sniper shootings demonstrate the effectiveness of partnerships in communicating information in a crisis. While no standards currently exist in the U.S. for public safety and media partnerships, the success of public information and warning partnerships between government and the media in the U. K. is a benchmark for success. City leaders have an opportunity to apply the valuable lessons learned from Katrina and other disasters to avoid repeating the same mistakes.

The City of Seattle's emergency operations plan remains inadequate until it includes a crisis communication strategy for the public safety leaders who are the primary spokespersons in the initial stages of a disaster. Seattle's failure to plan the message and the manner in which it is delivered in a homeland security crisis leaves city leaders ill equipped to manage the potential chaos and confusion created by a fearful public. Now is the time for decision makers to prepare public safety officials for the next disaster by initiating a crisis communication plan.

The author recommends the city develop and implement a plan that emphasizes disaster planning, training, and media partnerships to accomplish the goal of making the city more prepared and its citizens less vulnerable. Arming leaders with the skills and knowledge to better manage information helps citizens to protect themselves. Leaders influence how well their communities respond and recover from a disaster, which has a direct impact on restoring local economy. By working with the news media to give clear directions during a crisis, a credible public safety leader can help:

- Decrease illness, injury and death
- Execute response and recovery plans with minimal resistance
- Avoid misallocation of limited resources
- Avoid wasting resources<sup>51</sup>

The benefits of planning, training and partnerships far outweigh the costs. Ultimately, it is cheaper and more cost effective to develop and practice crisis communication skills *before* the next significant incident occurs.

#### **A. CREATING A PLAN**

The proposed crisis communication plan provides the foundation for improved information sharing. Building a framework is the first in a series of planning steps for this new initiative. The framework includes the author's evaluation of the current strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) of the Seattle fire and police departments. The SWOT analysis is an assessment tool common to strategic planning for identifying an organization's assets and liabilities. The analysis below is based on data extrapolated from the surveys and interviews as well as the author's experience.

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<sup>51</sup> Reynolds, *Crisis and Emergency Risk Communications: By Leaders for Leaders*

<p style="text-align: center;"><b><u>STRENGTHS</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Commitment to saving lives and protecting property</li> <li>• Culture based on trust and teamwork</li> <li>• Credibility</li> <li>• Trusted role within diverse communities</li> <li>• Culture of ongoing operational training</li> <li>• Hazardous materials detection equipment and expertise</li> <li>• Regular media contact</li> <li>• Grant funding recipients</li> </ul>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b><u>WEAKNESSES</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No sense of urgency to address homeland security issues</li> <li>• Lack of crisis communication training</li> <li>• Lack of strategic planning experience</li> <li>• Lack of media training</li> <li>• Tense relationship with news media</li> <li>• Ongoing budgetary requirements for training</li> <li>• Interagency competition for federal grant funding</li> </ul>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b><u>OPPORTUNITIES</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Build trust</li> <li>• Reduce the likelihood of public panic/fear through CBRNE education</li> <li>• Empower the community to protect themselves</li> <li>• Improve public confidence</li> <li>• Provide CBRNE training for media</li> <li>• Improve relationships with media</li> <li>• Develop crisis communication skills</li> <li>• Recognition as homeland security professionals</li> <li>• Cross training with the news media</li> </ul>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b><u>THREATS</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No sense of urgency to address homeland security issues</li> <li>• Lack of internal support from rank and file</li> <li>• Lack of media support for the plan</li> <li>• Lack of budget support from the Executive and City Council</li> <li>• Interagency competition for UASI funding</li> <li>• Grant funding sustainability</li> <li>• Ongoing budgetary requirements for training</li> <li>• Lack of strategic planning experience</li> </ul>

Table 4. Public Safety SWOT Analysis

Table 4 compares the strengths and weaknesses of public safety agencies in relation to the opportunities and threats they face in creating a successful crisis communication plan. Based on the analysis, public safety's primary strengths to capitalize upon include a commitment to serving the community, public trust and credibility, and a professional culture built on training and technical expertise. Those strengths are undermined by the department's lack of strategic planning experience and reluctance to initiate training and media partnerships when budget and sustainability is an issue. Interagency competition for diminishing homeland security grant funding traditionally directed towards emergency operations obstructs the city's financial support of a crisis communication strategy. They lack an urgency to change without an imminent homeland security threat or danger. The list of weaknesses is similar to those characteristics defined as threats. A communication plan will never come to fruition without funding and internal and external stakeholder support.

Still, opportunities for positive change exist. Cross training with the news media on a regular basis builds familiarity and trust. A stronger relationship between organizations increases the likelihood of broadening the news media's homeland security knowledge to ensure the public receives more accurate information in a crisis. Access to information also helps reduce public fears by empowering the community to protect themselves. The opportunity for public safety and the news media to partner ultimately improves the public's confidence in their leadership.

Table 5 expands upon the public safety strengths and opportunities identified in the SWOT analysis. The table below suggests multiple methods for effectively managing the exchange of information with the news media. The author proposes the "inputs" or physical resources and the "outputs" or performances necessary to reach the desired crisis communication "outcomes" or goals. Using the first column in the table as an example, money is the input that funds the output of a crisis communication plan resulting in an outcome of fewer wasted and misallocated resources. These proposed strategies reflect best practices for information sharing and training before disaster occurs.

Inputs	Outputs	Outcomes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Money</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Homeland security crisis communication plan</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Avoid misallocation of limited resources</li> <li>• Avoid wasting resources</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Crisis communication consultants</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Crisis communication training for public safety leaders</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased skills</li> <li>• New knowledge</li> <li>• Decreases chances of illness, injury and death</li> <li>• Clear communication</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fire and police and chiefs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Primary spokesperson in a crisis</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Credible spokesperson helps public safety agencies execute response and recovery plans with minimal public resistance</li> <li>• Prevent confusion and chaos</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fire and police chiefs/Media</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Partnerships</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stronger relationships</li> <li>• Improved coordination of information</li> <li>• Increased trust</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Chemical, biological, radiological and explosive (CBRNE) experts</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• CBRNE training workshops and information database for media</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More accurate information decreases chances of illness, injury and death↓</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Names of police and fire subject matter experts (SME)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Police and Fire SME contact database for media</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More accurate information</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fire, police and media representatives</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Biannual emergency forums</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maintain ongoing relationships</li> <li>• Establish trust</li> <li>• Understanding roles and responsibilities in a crisis</li> <li>•</li> </ul>

Table 5. Information Sharing Strategies

## B. RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

The outcomes presented in Table 5 represent core reasons for creating a crisis communication plan. The following set of eight recommended actions expands on the ideas listed in the column under “outputs”. These action steps address planning, partnerships and training, the three primary areas survey and interview respondents identify as needing improvement.

- **Crisis Communication Training** – Public safety leaders and public information officers would receive the initial training on crisis messaging from communication experts. Public information officers would then conduct in-house training for the appropriate people in their departments. This contingency planning allows for backup in the event that leaders are unavailable. Refresher training continues on an annual basis.
- **Public Safety/Media Forums** – Establish biannual emergency forums between public safety officials, local news directors, assignment editors and reporters to identify each other’s expectations for obtaining and releasing information during a disaster similar to the United Kingdom’s Media Emergency Forums (MEF). (The MEF is a permanent forum for news editors, reporters, first responders and local authorities to create voluntary guidelines for information sharing and develops protocols and procedures for safety information and advice in a crisis.) The groups agree to meet within six weeks of a major incident for a joint debriefing to identify what works well and what does not. Face-to-face contact on a regular basis helps build trust between organizations.
- **Hands-On Training** – Design a “media academy” for local media. News media participate in hands-on and classroom fire and police training. The curriculum could include live fire training, shoot/don’t shoot scenarios, extrication and rescue techniques. Such an opportunity allows media to



better understand the fire and police cultures they report on everyday. It also increases the likelihood of more accurate reporting about public safety agencies.

- **On-air partnerships** – Establish partnerships with local broadcast news organizations. The Washington State Patrol currently partners with the local American Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) News affiliate to provide daily live traffic reports on television. This liaison gives the Washington State Patrol an avenue to reach millions of people instantly with important transportation information in the event of a disaster and benefits broadcasters by lending credibility to their news organization. Law enforcement in Britain has a similar partnership with the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) called “Connecting in a Crisis” where certain information is immediately broadcast over the radio in an emergency.
- **AMBER Alert Strategy** – Imitate the model of the AMBER Alert plan, a very successful voluntary agreement between law enforcement agencies and local radio and television to broadcast emergency bulletins nationwide when a child has been abducted and is believed to be in danger. The media’s ability to reach millions of people at once helps public safety disseminate critical information. The emergency bulletins can be utilized for a variety of emergencies.
- **Subject Matter Experts** – Broadcast media will have to fill a 24-hour news cycle with updated and ongoing information in a disaster. Public safety agencies can ensure more accurate information by identifying and introducing subject matter experts from their own departments to the broadcast news media prior to an emergency as resources to turn to when an event actually happens. Public safety agencies provide the media with names and contact phone numbers for subject matter experts.

- **Resource Database** – Provide media with fact sheets and background information on the current homeland security health and safety threats that can be stored in their newsroom computer database. For example, Seattle/King County Public Health could provide the latest data on pandemic flu or risks associated with a bioterrorism attack. The Department of Ecology could provide background on the potential effects of a dirty bomb. The Seattle Fire Department could provide information on the risks posed by hazardous materials used in a chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear, or explosive (CBRNE) attack etc.
- **Cross Training and Disaster Planning** – Include media as a partner in citywide disaster planning. Media become regular participants at tabletop exercises that focus on any number of different scenarios, e.g. pandemic flu, bioterrorism attacks or the detonation of a dirty bomb. In addition, subject matter experts provide in-house training to news room staff at television stations, radio stations and newspapers to help the media put emergency response situations in context for the public.

The graph in Figure 1 depicts the current relationship between public safety and the media based on the survey and interview data and how the relationship improves after implementing a communication plan that incorporates the eight recommended actions proposed above.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> W. Chan Kim and Renee Mauborgne, *Blue Ocean Strategy: How to Create Uncontested Market Space and Make the Competition Irrelevant* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2005), 148.

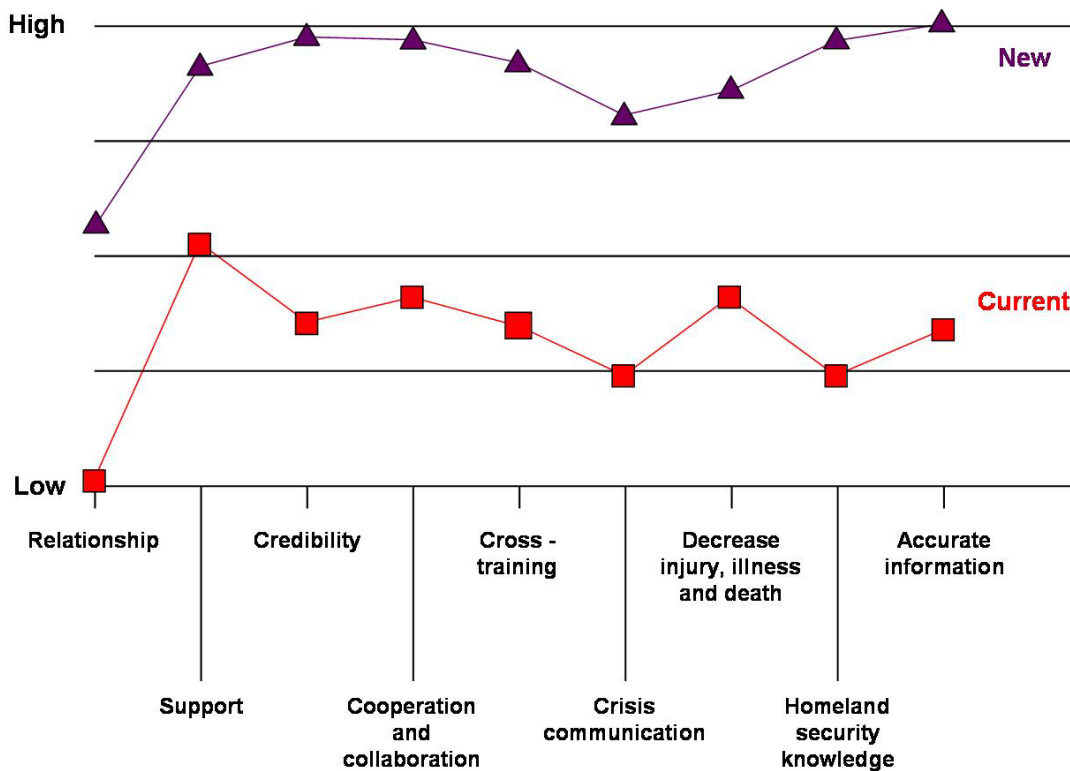


Figure 1. Public Safety and Media Partnerships

The bottom curve indicates the current areas for improvement. The top curve in the graph illustrates the impact that collaboration has on decreasing the likelihood of citizen injury, illness and death in a crisis through the exchange of more accurate information, increased threat knowledge and interagency training.

### C. SUPPORTING THE PLAN

In order to move forward, public safety leaders and news media executives must convince their own agencies and constituents that a plan to provide better, more accurate information in a crisis benefits the community by reducing the opportunities for public fear and panic and decreasing injuries and illness. Public safety needs to build support for the plan by identifying primary and secondary stakeholders and potential opponents. Certain stakeholders, including the mayor, city council members, the news media,

firefighters, police officers, unions, citizens, community groups, emergency managers, and other government agencies must engage in the process. The strategy has to be introduced to the primary stakeholders (news directors, the mayor, firefighters, police officers, and emergency managers) to solicit their feedback. Finally, the crisis communication plan must have political support and be executable without adding additional resources to the budget.

The success of the plan's information sharing component depends heavily on how well public safety and the broadcast news media work together as partners. Although the two organizations have historically conflicted, involving the media in city wide pre-disaster planning and training exercises benefits city leaders, public safety, and local news organizations. The advantage of public safety and media partnerships for political stakeholders is increased emergency preparedness which can minimize the economic impact in a crisis. The strategy directly benefits the community because people want to know where they should go and what they should do to protect themselves in a disaster.

#### **D. CONCLUSION**

This study suggests that Seattle public safety agencies and broadcast news media representatives are willing to improve their current relationship and explore opportunities to better coordinate the information they disseminate in a crisis. Now is the time for decision makers to prepare public safety officials and the news media for the next disaster by initiating a crisis communication plan. Despite the number of challenges, the value of informing and protecting the public outweighs the potential costs. A critical need exists to teach public safety officials and the media how to communicate with each other and the public in the event of a disaster. In disasters people rarely panic unless they lose faith in public authorities.<sup>53</sup>

Crisis communication represents a good investment because the plan can be exercised in both small and large-scale disasters and can be accomplished in stages.

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<sup>53</sup> Baruch Fischhoff, *Evaluating the Success of Terror Risk Communications* (Pittsburgh: Mary Ann Liebert, Inc., 2003), 255.

Leaders can employ different methods of communicating their pre-emergency public messages such as print and broadcast media, disaster preparedness websites, or community meetings. Because the public views safety officials as role models, they can effectively change the behaviors that put people at risk.

Emergency preparedness is more cost effective than the demonstrated costs of destruction and death caused by poor crisis communication and the ensuing loss of faith in public officials through bad publicity. The ways media report disasters (whether its effects are calming or panic inducing) influences how quickly people return to work and see life returning to normal. National guidance documents frequently overlook the importance of economic recovery, business continuity planning, aid to critical infrastructure, and the overall "return to normalcy". Since terrorists aim to create confusion and disrupt the economy, the faster communities can recover, the easier it is to restore economic stability. Effective working partnerships between public safety and the broadcast news media reflect the community's best interest by making cities less vulnerable during crises and ensuring that accurate safety information is disseminated to the right people at the right time. Public safety officials and the media must understand that they have a common enemy and the enemy is not either one of them.

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## APPENDIX

### A. ONLINE SURVEY AND MEDIA INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

<b>1. Do you work for a Fire agency or a Police agency?</b>			
Answer Option 1 Fire		25	61%
Answer Option 2 Police		16	39%
<b>Total</b>		41	100%
<b>2. What is the size of your agency?</b>			
Less than 50		6	15%
50-100		4	10%
100-200		8	21%
300-400		1	3%
400-500		0	0%
500-1,000		5	13%
Over 1,000		15	38%
<b>Total</b>		39	100%
<b>3. What is your position in the agency?</b>			
Chief of the Fire Department		2	
Chief of the Police Department		4	
Chief Officers		32	
Public Information Officer		3	
<b>Total</b>		41	

<b>4. How important are media relations to your agency's homeland security mission?</b>			
Not Important		1	2%
		2	5%
		3	7%
		3	7%
		11	27%
		10	24%
Very Important		11	27%
<b>Total</b>		41	100%
<b>5. The current emphasis on homeland security has changed my agency's relationship with media organizations?</b>			
Yes		14	34%
No		27	66%
<b>Total</b>		41	100%
<b>6. Please rate the quality of the relationship between your agency and the media.</b>			
Congenial		10	25%
		16	40%
		10	25%
		2	5%
		2	5%
		0	0%
Tense		0	0%
<b>Total</b>		40	100%

<b>7. Please rate the quality of the relationship between your agency and the media.</b>			
Weak		0	0%
		1	2%
		5	12%
		6	15%
		11	27%
		13	32%
Strong		5	12%
<b>Total</b>		41	100%
<b>8. Please rate the quality of the relationship between your agency and the media.</b>			
Unsatisfactory		0	0%
		2	5%
		2	5%
		5	12%
		12	29%
		13	32%
Satisfactory		7	17%
<b>Total</b>		41	100%
<b>9. Please rate the quality of the relationship between your agency and the media.</b>			
Trusting		2	5%
		12	29%
		8	20%
		10	24%
		6	15%
		3	7%
Untrusting		0	0%
<b>Total</b>		41	100%

<b>10. Please rate the quality of the relationship between your agency and the media</b>			
Excellent		6	15%
		11	27%
		14	34%
		7	17%
		2	5%
		1	2%
Poor		0	0%
<b>Total</b>		41	100%
<b>11. Does your agency have a media relations plan?</b>			
Yes		32	78%
No		9	22%
<b>Total</b>		41	100%
<b>12. How well do the media understand your command structure and operational procedures?</b>			
No Understanding		1	2%
		7	17%
		10	24%
		11	27%
		6	15%
		6	15%
Completely Understand		0	0%
<b>Total</b>		41	100%

<b>13. How frequently does your agency send media releases?</b>			
Never		1	2%
Seldom (Monthly)		17	42%
Frequently (Weekly)		17	42%
Very Frequently (Daily)		5	12%
<b>Total</b>		40	100%
<b>14. How frequently does your agency perform on-camera or radio interviews?</b>			
Never		1	2%
Seldom (Monthly)		22	55%
Frequently (Weekly)		12	30%
Very Frequently (Daily)		5	12%
<b>Total</b>		40	100%
<b>15. How frequently does your agency respond to media inquiries?</b>			
Never		0	0%
		2	5%
Seldom (Monthly)		2	5%
		7	18%
Frequently (Weekly)		11	28%
		7	18%
Very Frequently (Daily)		11	28%
<b>Total</b>		40	100%

<b>16. Does your agency ever withhold information from the media?</b>			
Yes		34	85%
No		6	15%
<b>Total</b>		40	100%
<b>17. The likelihood of my agency initiating an effort to develop a media partnership is high.</b>			
Strongly Disagree		1	2%
		2	5%
Tend to Disagree		4	10%
		5	12%
Tend to Agree		13	32%
		12	29%
Strongly Agree		4	10%
<b>Total</b>		41	100%

<b>18. My agency would be more willing to engage in a partnership with the media if it was a combined public safety agency effort.</b>			
Strongly Disagree		0	0%
		4	10%
Tend to Disagree		7	17%
		15	37%
Tend to Agree		12	29%
		3	7%
Strongly Agree		0	0%
<b>Total</b>		41	100%



<b>19. Who do you consider the best spokesperson for the department? (list more than one if applicable)</b>			
Public Information Officer		12	
Assistant, Deputy & Battalion Chiefs		13	
Fire Chief		12	
Lieutenant, Sergeant		7	
Police Chief		5	
<b>20. My agency would be willing to commit time and resources in advance of an emergency in order to manage the accuracy of information released to the public during a crisis.</b>			
Strongly Disagree		0	0%
		2	5%
Tend to Disagree		7	17%
		4	10%
Tend to Agree		12	29%
		11	27%
Strongly Agree		5	12%
<b>Total</b>		41	100%

<b>21. How often does your agency conduct media training for your employees?</b>			
Never		7	17%
		26	63%
Seldom (Monthly)		7	17%
		1	2%
Frequently (Weekly)		0	0%
		0	0%
Very Frequently (Daily)		0	0%
<b>Total</b>		41	100%

<b>22. How often does your agency invite the media to participate in drills, exercises or other?</b>			
Never		8	20%
Seldom (Monthly)		31	78%
Frequently (Weekly)		1	2%
Very Frequently (Daily)		0	0%
<b>Total</b>		40	100%
<b>23. List three key elements that are essential to a successful relationship between your agency and the media.</b>			
<b>24. What do you think the media expects from your agency during a crisis?</b>			
<b>25. What does your agency expect from the media during a crisis?</b>			
<b>26. What is your agency's greatest area of vulnerability concerning the media?</b>			
<b>27. Name three policies or guidelines your agency uses to maintain a good relationship with the media.</b>			
<b>28. How could your agency's relationship with the media be improved?</b>			

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